

Reps. Ferguson and Degnan Take Issue with Demo Caucus

Big cities versus the bush has once again upset the legislature. This time, it was climaxed when Frank Ferguson, independent from Kotzebue, stalked angrily out of an unofficial Democratic pre-session caucus when his former party associates turned down the idea of a Bush legislator as head of the House Finance Committee.

Among those proposed by Ferguson are Ernie Haugen, from Petersburg-Wrangell and

Chuck Degnan, Democrat from Unalakleet. Degnan talked this week to the Tundra Times about politics, both specific and gen-

eral, in and for the outlying areas.

Problems arose, according to Degnan, when "two Anchorage legislators (Dick McVeigh and Helen Fischer) said they could not accept a bush legislator as as finance chairman because it would make the sessions too long."

He went on to say that Ferguson told them their position was unacceptable to him as a bush legislator and walked out.

"I felt I was the best one qualified for the position and was disappointed that they felt that way," Degnan said.

Another long-standing issue

was the continuing feud between bush and urban areas over the budget. Since a large portion of last session's money went to remote areas, particularly around Bethel, many urban legislators felt they got "short half of the wishbone."

"When you sit down and figure out what resulted from a 'bush legislature,' who benefited from it? Everybody in Alaska did," Degnan said.

Ferguson also discussed the difficulties with the Tundra Times. He went into various issues, noting that one of the major ones in the upcoming legislature would be subsidizing air freight to the villages.

Ferguson, elected as an independent write-in candidate after he was beaten in the August primary by Brenda Iita, is currently working on organizing a coalition of other politicians.

He said that he and the others involved might possibly get some Republicans to join the Democrats. If he leaves the party completely, it could make the already-skimpy margin of 20 Democrats to 19 Republicans that much smaller. But if he does not, he said that he would be willing to follow Republican leadership as long as bush needs were met.

Returning to the subject of general political needs and goals, he said, "The last legislature began much-needed development in the bush but didn't really put much of a dent in the real needs of the area."

Degnan said much the same thing, emphasizing that priorities for remote areas included better housing, improvement of educational system and especially a good communications system, possibly a domestic-satellite type.

Communications, he said, are impossible and transportation is all but the same.

Transportation leads back into the subject of subsidies, which already exist for the mail service but which Degnan and others would like to see added to freight and passenger services as well.

The bush dwellers, he said, have no road system, no boats and the highest cost of living expenses for people who have the lowest incomes.

They have a different level of need than urban dwellers, he added, and said that unless you solve these two problems (communication and transportation) you won't get anywhere.

"I would like subsidies for air carriers, and I would like to see it treated as a highway system, because that is our highway system," Degnan maintained.

Also, subsidized freight and passenger rates would lower the cost of living for the people there and make it feasible for airlines to get to bush regions.

"They (McVeigh and Fischer) might change their minds," he commented, again talking about the finance committee dispute, "but we still need to convince them. I think it's an over-reaction to editorial opinion" of local news media.

"All of Alaska is part of the bush. If their target is to pacify the people of Anchorage, I think the Anchorage people are more intelligent than that."

Legislative sessions begin around January 8, 1973, with the Democratic pre-session caucusing beginning in Juneau on December 10th of this year. What results from these meetings, how the eligibility and vote-recounting questions concerning Willard Bowman and Joe Orsini will affect the division of power in the House and other such questions should keep state politics from getting dull for some time.